

PEN IN HAND

BEN AMES WILLIAMS

Man, in his goings to and fro, engraves upon the world a record of his movements. Thus the roads he builds are, in fact, inscriptions, which the wise eye may read. And these traces which his feet have etched persist with a curious stubbornness, whether they were in the beginning the broad, paved highways of the Romans or merely narrow forest tracks beaten deep by the padding feet of Indian warriors long ago. Yet unless these thoroughfares are kept in repair and tended, they will by and by begin to disappear, just as the inscription on an ancient tombstone is blurred by eroding time.

A fair proportion of the roads in Fraternity are of improved construction, broad and firm; a further number are graveled and repaired. But there are others which, save for the occasional services of a scraper to drag the contents of the roadside ditches up on the traveled way, have no care at all. And a road is like an artery or a vein: so long as traffic, no matter how thin, does flow to and fro along its length, it will retain some beat of life. But when this traffic ceases, the road begins to wither and decay. Grass grows between the wheel tracks, and alders and birches press in from either side.

You will occasionally find such a road leading to some remote hilltop in Fraternity where once upon a time there was a farm. More often than not, nowadays, of that farm no more than a cellar hole remains, and a few gnarled and neglected apple trees where partridge like to feed. But this is not always the case. There is one such byway which turns aside from the road down Muzzy Ridge; and if a traveler found this cart track and climbed tortuously for a quarter mile or so,

he would emerge upon a height of land that overlooks a pond in the deep valley below, and the rising slopes of the mountain beyond.

And he would discover a neat stand of buildings there—a small white house and a shed and a barn. For this is where old Grandma Ankers—"Marm" Ankers in the local phrase—lived till these latter years alone.

She was a little old woman with a tongue that could rasp like a file, and a sharp wit to whet her tongue; and she dwelt in this house on the hill, with a horse in the barn and a cow in the tie-up, and a few chickens and a pig for only company. She was a precise old woman, scrupulously neat and clean; you would never see a chicken in her barnyard, nor a cat in her kitchen. And there was in her an indomitable courage and an independence that declined open help from any man.

Her left arm had been amputated between wrist and elbow many years ago; yet with only one hand she did all her household tasks sufficiently. And Marm Ankers had a quality that might be called morale. Though not once a week did any visitor climb the hill, there was never an afternoon that the little old lady did not dress in her best and wait in a seemingly composure, ready to receive any callers who might come. Remote from the world, forgotten for the most part by the world, she nevertheless thought of herself as a part of the world and held her proud place there.

Once a week, on Saturday mornings, she harnessed her horse to the old buckboard and drove down to the store in the village, three or four miles away, to buy dry groceries and other small requirements. This was a routine from which over a period of years she did not deviate except when snow lay deep upon the ground. When this was the case, Andy Wattles used to carry her supplies from the main road up to the house. He would stop his big truck at the foot of her lane, and put on his snowshoes if the drifts required, and so make his deliveries; and out of this occasional contact there developed between these two a certain intimacy and friendliness.

Andy even managed, without her knowing it, to make sure now and then that all went well with the solitary old woman on the hill. So, though Marm Ankers thought of herself as self-sufficient and dependent on no one at all, yet she was protected too.

Saturday was her day for driving to the village; so when, on a certain Friday morning, Andy looked out through the side door of the store and saw her buckboard wheel up to the hitch rail, he was surprised, and he wondered why she had come. It is the occasion for this deviation from her routine which is to be here set down.

This Friday morning fell in late October, when the trees were

stripped bare of their bright autumn foliage and the cold clasp of winter began to grip the land. The days were long and still, and small sounds rang far. The old woman who lived on the hill could look for miles across the countryside, and she liked on such days to do so; to watch the deepening shadows lengthen as the sun sank low. But the Thursday before this particular Friday was a cold day and a raw one; and she stayed indoors save when her necessary business in the barn required attendance there. Thursday afternoon she dressed in her black silk as her custom was, and sat by the dining-room window where she could watch the lane that came up from the road half a mile below the house; but no one came, and at dusk she changed into her house dress and put on an apron and lighted the lamps and took a lantern and went to the tie-up to milk and feed the cow, to pull down hay for the old horse in his stall.

She came back into the kitchen with a brimming pail of milk and poured it into the scoured, bright pans to set; and she put the milk pans away in the buttery. She filled the wood box, and chunked up the fire and made tea and toast and boiled an egg for her supper. She set the table in the dining room and brought her victuals there.

And when she came from the kitchen into the dining room with the steaming teapot in her hand, she saw, outside one of the windows, a white shadow that instantly did disappear. It was, unmistakably, a face: the face of someone who had stood outside the window, at a little distance, looking in. The face of someone who, on seeing her, quickly withdrew.

Now, Marm Ankers was not a timorous old woman, but neither was she a rash one. She had always a sum of money in the house, sufficient for her immediate needs; and this might be suspected by anyone who knew her ways, might even serve as bait to some unscrupulous one. When she saw the face outside the window, she remembered the money hidden in her bedroom; so she gave no sign that she had seen. She set the teapot on the table and went into her bedroom and took something from beneath her pillow. Then she continued through another bedroom beyond, into the front of the house. She entered the dark parlor and, herself invisible, looked out of the window there.

The night outside was dark under a cloudy, moonless sky. But there was light enough so that she could see a dark figure, half crouching, which moved across the farmyard toward the barn. This figure was no more than a shadow, and it lost itself in the shadow of the barn and disappeared. Marm Ankers was not afraid; nevertheless, she knew a certain satisfaction that her chores in the barn were done

for the night. She waited awhile, but the figure did not reappear; so she came back into the dining room and slid the bolt on the shed door and drew the blinds on the windows.

Then she sat down and ate her supper quietly. Her tea had cooled, and she liked it scalding hot, but she endured the inconvenience calmly. Afterward she washed the dishes and put them all away. She thought with a faint regret that it was too bad she had no telephone, but she had discarded that instrument long ago. The continual shrilling of the bell on a party line annoyed her beyond bearing. Yet now it would have been reassuring to have a word with Andy Wattles. She felt herself incredibly isolated from the world.

But this could not be helped tonight. After a while she went to bed. Her bedroom had one window and two doors. She bolted the doors, and she lay facing the window, which was a pale rectangle in the black wall of the room. By and by she slept the faint sleep of old people; but nothing happened to disturb her, and when she awoke it was dawn.

She got up and dressed and went into the kitchen to start the fire. When she raised the blinds the farmyard was empty; the chickens in their pen behind the shed pecked at the frost-cemented ground with an empty-headed optimism. A partridge perched in an apple tree in the orchard back of the kitchen. From the parlor windows she could see nothing except the birch covert shadowed by young pines on the slope below the house.

When she had thus looked all around, Marm Ankers returned to the kitchen and saw that the wood box was almost empty. The wood was in the shed. She opened the shed door cautiously. She lifted the latch with her maimed left arm, while her right hand dropped into the pocket of her apron. But there was no one in the shed, so she went in and brought wood. She pumped a pail of water and filled the kettle on the stove. Some tramp, she decided, had taken shelter for the night in the haymow in the barn. By this time, no doubt, he was gone.

She delayed milking till after breakfast, but when she came to the tie-up, the cow looked at her with a moody resentment. Usually there were two or three quarts of milk even in the morning, but today she had trouble in getting a quart. She considered this fact thoughtfully, her shrewd old eyes darting to and fro.

When she carried the pail back into the kitchen a team was coming up the cart track from the main road. She put the pail down in the sink; and as the team stopped in the yard, she opened the kitchen door. When the man alighted, Marm Ankers stepped out on the

veranda, drawing a knitted shawl about her shoulders against the cold.

"Morning, Marm," said the man. He was Levi Fee. Despite the fact that this little old woman lived far from the world, she knew her neighbors for twenty miles; for she had lived hereabouts all her many years, and so for the most part had they. Levi was a bachelor. His solitary farm was over on the slopes of the mountain, three miles beyond her own. She could even see it from her own dooryard now; a small square of white against the black growth, far away.

"Morning, Levi," she returned. He was a tall man in overalls and a heavy woolen coat, with felts and rubbers on his feet. A lean man, lank and wiry. When he unbuttoned his coat she saw, where a button on his shirt was gone, that he wore a white cotton undershirt, though the time for winter flannels had come. Also she thought Levi began to put on weight; he was heavier at the waist than she remembered.

"All right, are you?" Levi inquired.

"Why wouldn't I be?" she retorted.

But instead of replying, he asked: "Didn't see anyone around here yest'day, did you?"

"Don't many folks come this way," she reminded him.

He nodded, with a jerk of his head toward the valley below them. "Will Hedrick killed his pa down there, night before last," he explained. "And got away. The sheriff figures he went afoot. 'Lowed we'd pick him up before now, but we ain't. Thought he maybe come this way."

"Killed his pa?" she repeated. "That boy?"

"The old man had money," he pointed out. She nodded. Pop Hedrick was, in fact, notoriously rich, notoriously miserly. He had money; had, they said, the first dollar he ever earned, and all the interest that dollar had earned in the intervening years. He rented money to his neighbors, and collected the rent, and had in time the money back again—or knew the reason why. He owned a dozen farms across the hills, on mortgage deeds. Marm Ankers had known him for fifty years.

"I heerd tell Will had come home," she agreed.

"Lost his job in Boston," Levi assented. "But he didn't take kindly to farming. I was in the village Wednesday afternoon, and Andy asked me would I leave some bundles at the old man's house. So I said I would, on the way home. I pulled into the yard, and there was a light in the kitchen. So I knocked and nobody answered. So I looked in the window. There he was! Stretched acrost the floor!"

Marm Ankers drew her shawl a little tighter. "Come in and set," she told him. "I want to know."

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"I'd stopped to see the old man in the morning on my way to the village," Levi explained, when they were seated beside the stove. "Owed him a piece of interest, and paid it. Will wan't around. Old Pop told me Will wouldn't ever make a hand. Said he was plumb discouraged with the boy. I always liked Pop. Wisht I'd got there in time to stop it. I might have, too, but I lost a nut off my nigh front wheel. Had a time to find it in the dark. When I got there, the old man was dead, and Will gone!"

"Did Will take the money?" she asked.

Levi shook his head.

"He didn't find it, but he'd looked for it," he assured her. "Things were tore up some, boards pulled out of the floor, and the mantel ripped off, and a brick out of the chimney and all. But he didn't find it, no. Me and Sheriff Sohier found it, yest'day morning."

"Much?" she inquired.

"Only a little over five hundred dollars," he confessed. "I 'lowed there'd be more!"

"Where'bouts was it hid?"

"That was slick too," Levi assured her. "It was behind the bed in his room. He'd loosened a corner of the paper on the wall, and glued a couple of corset steels on it so it'd hold snug down. You wouldn't hardly notice it at all, but I got to thumping the wall. You could kind of bend the wall paper up, right above the baseboard, and there was a hole in there, six inches deep and three inches high and about as wide." He added: "Guess he had the most of his money in the bank, at that. Pop was more of a businessman than people'd think. Kep' books, and always give receipts and all."

"Give you a receipt for the interest money yesterday?" she suggested.

"Certain," he assured her. He even took a worn leather wallet from his pocket and showed her the bit of paper. She put on her spectacles to read it, gave it back again. But she asked then:

"How come you're out hunting Will? That's the sheriff's job, it looks to me. And how come you know he did it?"

"He was gone," Levi pointed out. "No reason he should run away only if he did it. Shot the old man with his own gun, through the neck. Long as I was the first to see him, Sheriff Sohier wanted to know if I'd ask around, today, and see could I get any word of Will, and I 'lowed I would. I liked the old man."

Marm Ankers smoothed her apron down. But there was a lump in the pocket of the apron, made conspicuous by this gesture, so she laid her hand across this lump for concealment.

"Lain't seen hide nor hair of him," she said then.

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"I just come by on the off chance he might have gone this way," Levi explained, and he rose. "I aim to ask all around. He might have showed somewhere."

"If he didn't get the money, he might wait to try again," she suggested; but Levi chuckled, shook his head.

"Wouldn't do him no good now," he assured her. "Since we found it." She followed him out on the kitchen porch to watch him drive away.

The old woman stayed on the porch, her shawl over her head, while Levi's horses picked their course down the rocky lane. Horses and wagon and Levi disappeared, but she could hear their departure after they were out of sight. She waited till these sounds were no longer audible; and then Marm Ankers turned across the farmyard to the barn.

She stood in the wide doors of the barn and looked in and all around. The horse in his stall nickered at her; the cow in the tie-up stirred.

And Marm Ankers called sharply: "Will Hedrick, you come down out of there!"

Nothing happened. She took three steps forward, looking up into the mow. And she repeated: "Will, come down!" She added: "Don't keep me standing here!"

After a long time then there was a movement in the hay. The barn was framed on timbers, weathered and old. Above one of these timbers a face appeared, and a young man looked down. The young man's eyes were haggard, and his cheek was pale and his lips were white. He looked at old Marm Ankers, and she said again, more softly:

"Come down, you young fool!"

Will Hedrick moved to obey her, and a moment later he stood unsteadily on the barn floor, in a heap of hay dislodged by his sliding descent.

She stared at him, and she asked: "What's the matter with your foot?"

"I stuck an ax into it," the boy admitted.

"You can walk, can't you?" she demanded. He nodded in a dumb fashion; and she said harshly: "Then walk yourself into my kitchen and I'll bandage it for you."

So young Will Hedrick hobbled past her, went before her through the shed into the kitchen. Behind him she exclaimed irascibly:

"You hadn't any call to scare a body to death, peeping in windows and all."

"No, ma'am," he admitted humbly.

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In the kitchen she set him in a chair. She filled a basin with hot water and stripped the bloody bandage off his foot. There was a deep gash from ankle bone to sole.

"Ax slid on some frozen wood," said Will in the silence. "I couldn't see where I was hitting. It was along toward dark."

"You're a clumsy young one," she told him. "Set still! What made you run away?" She began to bathe the wound while he answered her.

"I was chopping wood down by the pond," he said. "Pop was mad at me, so I wanted to put in a good long day for him. So I worked late as I could see; and then I cut my foot, and time I come back to the house it was past dark. I couldn't move very fast this way. So when I come to the house, I heard the commotion, and peeked in the window. Sheriff was there, and Levi Fee, and two-three others. Heard them say: 'Will done it, sure!' And I could see Pop, dead on the floor. So I was scared to go in. I sneaked away."

"How come your pa to be mad at you?" she demanded.

"I went to write a letter Tuesday night, to a man in Boston, asking for a job, and I broke the point on the pen. It was the last point he had."

Her bright old eyes looked up at him. "Mad about that, was he?"

"He give me fits when he found it out," the boy confessed. "Lowed I broke everything I touched. I offered to walk to the village and get him a new point, and he said I was just looking for an excuse not to work. Wednesday noon, that was, when I had come in to dinner. He told me to telephone from Tomer's and order some coffee and things, and a new pen point. He said Andy'd get somebody to bring 'em by the house, without my wasting half a day going to fetch them."

"Ordered some new pens, did you?"

"One," said Will. "Pop wouldn't have more. Said I hadn't any call to write letters. Said he'd do the writing for the family."

She looked at him sharply. "I dunno as I blame you for shooting him," she declared. "The miserly old hound! But why didn't you wait till you knowed where his money was?"

"I never shot him," he protested miserably. "And I knowed where he kep' his money, if it comes to that."

"Where did he keep it?" she challenged; and he said:

"Under a flap of wallpaper, in the wall behind his bed. Right above the baseboard. He'd fixed some corset steels in the wall paper to spring it down, make it lie flat."

She was bandaging his foot. She was incredibly deft with her one hand. She drew the bandage snug and secured it there.

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"There," she said. "Now go on in the dining room and lie down on the sofa. I'm going to change my dress."

"I never shot pa," he insisted, while she helped him cross to the other room.

"Then you was a fool to run away," she retorted. "Lie down now, and lie still. If you start that foot bleeding again, you'll spot my floors!"

"Yes, ma'am," said Will.

She disappeared, returned in coat and bonnet. He asked quickly: "Where you going?"

"None of your business!" she said. "But you're a-staying here!" She hesitated, looked at him shrewdly. "You're still scared," she decided. "But I guess you've had enough of running away. You stay here till I come back."

"Ma'am," he whispered hopelessly, "I didn't do it."

She nodded sternly. "If I'd thought you did," she said, "I'd have done different by you. Now you lay where you be."

So young Will Hedrick was surprisingly comforted. He stayed passively on the sofa while she went out to the barn. Later, through the kitchen windows, he saw her drive away.

And this was how it happened that Marm Ankers came to the village Friday morning and spoke with Andy Wattles in the store. Later she drove home again. She found Will where she had left him there.

Early that afternoon, an automobile made its way up the lane to the farm on the hill: and this was a rare thing, and a hazardous. The car leaped and bucked on the rocky road, and the engine roared. Will heard it, and Marm Ankers heard it, and the little old woman went out on the porch to watch the automobile come into the yard.

It was Sheriff Sohier's car. The sheriff drove, and Levi Fee sat beside him, and Andy was on the seat behind. Will, watching fearfully through the window, saw them alight; saw Marm Ankers go to meet them there.

Sheriff Sohier was a slow, sure man. He passed the time of day; and he said, looking thoughtfully around:

"I'd have been here sooner, only we had to go fetch Levi. You say Will's here?"

"He's inside," she agreed. "Come in, the lot of you."

Levi said ruefully, "I feel kind of bad about this, Marm. I always kind of liked Will."

"You can tell him so," she said. "Come in! . . . Andy, you too."

So she led the way into the kitchen, into the dining room. Behind her came the three tall men.

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They were all big men, and she was very small; and Will Hedrick, lying pale and weak on the sofa, stared up at them helplessly. Sheriff Sohier spoke to him.

"Aft'noon, Will," he said uncomfortably. "I'm sorry to hear about this, son."

"He'll be all right," Marm Ankers interjected. "He's got a bad cut, but no bones broke. It'll heal up, give it time."

"I mean, about this other," the sheriff explained. He stood now beside the sofa, Levi at the foot of it, Andy by the door.

"You mean him killing his pa?" she asked; and she laughed, a strange, metallic little cackle of mirth. "It's a wonder to me sometimes," she said, "that a man can live to grow up and still be the fools most men are!"

"Yes, Ma'am," the sheriff agreed.

"And I don't mean Will," said Marm Ankers. "I mean any man. You're as bad as any, sheriff."

The officer looked at her gravely. "How come?" he inquired.

"Why, Will never done it!" she told him.

He rubbed his chin. "That so?"

"He was chopping wood, down by the pond, till dark," she explained. "Ax slipped into his foot. He had to crawl most all the way home. Time he got there, you was all there; and he heerd your talk. So he run away."

"He say so?" Sheriff Sohier asked her.

She nodded. "And he did so," she insisted. "If he'd killed his pa, would he stop afterwards to chop his foot half off?"

"The house was tore up," the sheriff pointed out. "Where he'd ripped up boards and so on, looking for the old man's money. Likely he cut himself then."

"See any blood on the floor?"

"There was blood enough," the other assured her.

"He'd have left tracks of it," she insisted, "if it was him." And she added: "Besides, he knowed where the money was. Told me where it was. Knowed all the time. He wouldn't have to look for it at all."

The sheriff clung shrewdly to his point. "He might have let on he didn't know, to fool us," he urged.

"Money wan't gone, was it?" she demanded.

The man scratched his head. "Well, maybe he took the most of it and left some. To fool us," he repeated.

She nodded. "Maybe so," she agreed. "But we can find out." She turned to Levi. "Levi, you paid the old man some money that morning. Show the sheriff that receipt Pop wrote for you."

Levi readily obeyed. The sheriff scanned the bit of paper, and

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Marm Ankers asked: "How about the money you paid him, Levi? Was it there? Guess you'd know the bills, wouldn't you?"

Levi nodded. "Yes, ma'am," he declared. "It was there." He hesitated. "There was a ten-dollar bill tore half in two. I see it when we found the money." He added: "It was all there, I'd say."

And the little old woman said readily: "You see, sheriff, Will and his pa had a row that day. Will tried to write a letter the night before, and broke the pen point. It was the only one in the house, and his pa was mad at that. So next day Will telephoned to the store and ordered a new one, along with the groceries, that afternoon. . . . Levi, you fetched the things from the store, didn't you?"

"Yes, ma'am," Levi assured her. "Yes, ma'am, Andy here'll tell you so."

"That's right," Andy agreed.

"Pen point and all?" Marm Ankers asked, and Andy said:

"Yes, ma'am."

The old woman looked at the sheriff triumphantly, but the sheriff sighed. "Just the same," he insisted, "I guess we'll have to take Will to town. I don't see as there's anything else to do."

"I never done it," Will protested hopelessly. "I never killed pa!"

"I dunno as you did," the sheriff assented. "But, Will, all I can do is the best I see. You hadn't ought to blame me. If you didn't, I guess it'll come out in time."

"I didn't," Will said again, weakly.

And Marm Ankers spoke in irascible tones. "You're plain dumb, sheriff!" she declared. They were all save Andy grouped here by the sofa, but the old woman swung away from them now with a gesture of impatience. "There ain't a critter living as stubborn and blind as a dumb man," she declared. "A blind man could see Will never did this. He hadn't any call to. He could have took the money any time, and gone."

But Levi protested at that. "No, ma'am! Pop Hedrick kep' his eyes open. It'd take a weasel to get his money, long as he was alive. Even if you knowed where it was."

She stood now in the kitchen door. Andy had moved aside. She looked at Levi.

"A pity," she said, "you didn't get there sooner, Levi. You left the store by half-past three, but you didn't get to him, by your own tell, till after dark."

"I lost a nut off my nigh front wheel," he reminded her. "Had to walk back and look for it."

"If it wan't for that," she said, "you'd have had time to get there and pay him what you owed him and have him write the receipt

before he was killed. If it wan't for that nut that you say you lost."

"I'd paid him that morning," Levi pointed out. "On the way to town."

"So you say!" she assented in a dry tone. "So you say! But the thing that sticks in my crop, Levi, how could he write that receipt for you in the morning, when there wan't a pen point in the house? How could he write it before you come along and brought the pen from the store?"

There was a sudden hush in this small room. A long, pulsing silence. Will and Sheriff Sohier looked at Marm Ankers, and so did Levi. But Andy watched Levi Fee.

And after a long time Marm Ankers said: "If it wan't for that nut falling off, you could have got there, and paid him, and got the receipt, and gone down the road, and sneaked back to see where he put the money away, and—sneaked in the house again, Levi." She said crisply: "Will says the gun was in the corner by the door, and shells on the windowsill. Pop would go into the bedroom to put the money away. He couldn't hear good. He wouldn't hear you come in. You could have been waiting for him when he come out of the bedroom. With the gun all loaded, ready. Plenty of time, if it wan't for that nut off your wagon."

The man, after a moment, laughed. "Plenty of time, yes, if it wan't for that."

"Anybody see you hunting that nut along the road?"

"Couple cars passed," said Levi Fee. "Sure."

"Who? Whose cars?"

"Didn't know them! Camden men, up gunning, likely. I'd know them again. I'll go down to Camden tomorrow and hunt 'em up, if the sheriff wants me to prove my say."

She shook her head. "It's the pen sticks in my craw!" she said.

"Maybe Pop found a pen point in the house that he'd forgot," Levi suggested. "For all I know."

The old woman looked at the sheriff. "You open the bundles, see what was in them?" she asked. He nodded, and she insisted: "See any pen point in them, did you?"

"There was a new point in the pen," he said. "On the table!"

"The pen was on the table, was it?" And she looked again at Levi. Her eyes narrowed. "Like Pop had maybe been using it right before he was killed." And abruptly she changed the subject. "Got a new undershirt, ain't you, Levi?" she asked. "How come you're wearing cotton? I sh'd think you'd have your flannels on by now."

"I got flannels underneath," he said, suddenly ill at ease.

"Thought you looked kind of puffed out, around the waist," she

commented, "when I see you this morning. Kind of lumpy, under your overalls." She seemed to meditate. "Whoever killed Pop might have took some of the money, sheriff. That's what you said, wan't it? Might have tore up the house, to let on he'd looked for it and didn't find it. Might have took some money, and left some, to make it look as if he didn't find it at all." She faced Levi Fee again. "Levi, you'd be smart enough to do that. But you might be fool enough to carry the money on you. Maybe fastened onto the tail of your new undershirt. Let's see!"

The man stood for a moment rigidly. Then he laughed. "Why, Marm," he said, "if you're bent on it!"

He put his hand inside the bib of his overalls. Then he drew it out again.

But when his hand reappeared, it held an ancient pistol, thick-muzzled, ponderously deadly.

"I don't know as I've got any call to show you my undershirt," said Levi Fee, and he grinned at them all.

No one spoke, nor moved; and he backed toward the door. Toward the kitchen door, and the nearest way to the yard. He said nothing, but he watched the sheriff alertly, and Andy too.

He paid no heed to little Marm Ankers in the doorway behind him. She was too small to oppose his escape, too small and frail. He backed almost to the door where she stood, the pistol steady in his hand. He paused then.

"I didn't do it," he said. "Hadn't any hand in it. But, sheriff, you're just dumb enough to arrest me; and I don't 'low to be. You and Andy, you stay where you are. I'm leaving."

He took another step backward. But then something touched him in the spine, and Marm Ankers said crisply: "Don't turn around, Levi!"

He stood very still.

"A lone woman has to keep a gun in the house," she reminded him. "With the kind of rapsCALLIONS live around here. You just open your hand and let your gun fall."

He did not; and she whispered: "I knowed old Pop Hedrick all my life, Levi! I'd admire it if you was to make a move."

So presently there was a thump upon the floor; and then Andy and the sheriff came at swift stride across the room, and when they held him, it was Marm Ankers who said briskly:

"Now, Andy, pull his shirttail out. I want to know how right I be."

Levi did not resist them. There was no more resistance in him

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now; and when the thick pads of bills sewed roughly into flaps on his undershirt were revealed, she cackled gleefully.

"There!" she ejaculated. "Sheriff, I dunno what you think, but that's enough for me."

"Enough for anybody, I'd say," he agreed. "Marm, I'm obliged to you."

"You're obliged to be," she said complacently. "Now the lot of you get out of here. You've tracked mud clear across my floor."

But before they were gone Andy asked: "What about Will, Marm? Want I should help you take care of him? I can come back later on."

She looked down at young Will Hedrick, and after a moment she said:

"I've had no chick nor child that needed me this forty years. And Will needs someone now. I aim to hold on to him. You go along, Andy, and leave us be."